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Review of David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin*

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Review of David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin*

Abstract

Hagiography and history tell their stories at cross-purposes. While hagiography glorifies, even sanctifies its heroes, history strips them of their traditional greatness, seeking to bare the factual truth to which documents and testimonies attest. Nowhere is this contrast more evident than in the history and study of Hasidism. Legends (*shevahim*) are the building blocks of the Hasidic tradition, in which the rabbi is a leader, a miracle worker and a storyteller. He is the narrating subject, who, in turn, becomes the object of stories subsequent generations tell.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

The publication in which this item appeared has since ceased.

David Assaf. *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of R. Israel of Ruzhin*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1997. Pp. 538 (In Hebrew).

Hagiography and history tell their stories at cross-purposes. While hagiography glorifies, even sanctifies its heroes, history strips them of their traditional greatness, seeking to bare the factual truth to which documents and testimonies attest. Nowhere is this contrast more evident than in the history and study of Hasidism. Legends (*shevachim*) are the building blocks of the Hasidic tradition, in which the rabbi is a leader, a miracle worker and a storyteller. He is the narrating subject, who, in turn, becomes the object of stories subsequent generations tell. As episodic biographies these narratives bring the contrast between hagiography and history into a clear focus. Yet, the scarcity of documents and the tendentiousness of even contemporaneous testimonies make the explicit, or even implicit, comparison between collective hagiographic memory and history extremely rare.

Now David Assaf has written a biographical study of one of the most colorful figures in the Hasidic movement of the nineteenth century. R. Israel of Ruzhin (1796 -1850) who was the great-grandson of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, led a life full of contradictions and drama that would befit a Hollywood hero more than a Hasidic rabbi. A non-literate who could barely sign his name, he headed a Hasidic court and dispensed advice steeped in tradition to community leaders and commoners alike. Rubbing shoulders with government officials and Jewish *maskilim*, he led a life of glamour and wealth that made him a king among the Hasidim, hence the title of Assaf's book. At the height of his popularity he was arrested, and he lingered in a Russian jail for twenty-two months, charged in a conspiracy to commit murder. After his release he escaped across the border to Romania and settled in Sadgora where he renewed his life of glamour. R. Israel of Ruzhin was certainly not a run-of-the-mill miracle worker.

Hasidic oral tradition retains his image and narratives of his adventures. More than a hundred years after his death, Jerome Mintz recorded Hasidic narrators in New York who told him how R. Israel of Ruzhin sneaked over the border [*Legends of the Hasidim* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), pp. 192-3, 264-6].

However the pietistic Hasidic tradition in which saintliness retains a higher value than royalty, demoted him from his throne and marginalized him as a historical curiosity.

In his historical study, David Assaf restores R. Israel of Ruzhin to his full glory and in describing his life and time, explores the emergence of the rabbinical dynasties and their courts in the Hasidic movement during the first half of the nineteenth century, and its impact on subsequent generations. The concluding chapters amount to a historical ethnography in which, relying on documents, descriptions and recollections, Assaf makes the Hasidic courts and their inhabitants come alive. The relevance of this book to history, hagiography, folklore, and anthropology of Hasidism makes it indispensable reading.

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Hasan-Rokem, Galit, Guest Editor. *Folk Culture and Popular Culture. Theory and Criticism: An Israeli Forum* 10. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad/The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 1997 (Hebrew with English summaries).

At a time when folklorists flounder in America, they flourish in Israel. Being under the perennial threat of department closures, American folklorists have ventured into the fields of public folklore that politicians have mined. In contrast, in Israel, while making slow and modest progress at the universities, folklorists have joined forces with non-academic intellectuals and scholars in other disciplines to present before the public their latest research analyses and their explorations of new directions. *Theory and Criticism* ("Teoria uvikoret") is one of Israel's leading forums for ideas and scholarship. It is an interdisciplinary journal that appeals to a growing public of academically educated readers and adheres to scholarly standards and format. The publication of a special issue devoted to "Folk Culture and Popular Culture," following shortly the appearance of a volume edited by Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Studies in the History of Popular Culture* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1996), attests to the strengthened position of folklore in Israel.